Prescription for the "Blahs"
Romans 3: 21-26
October 26, 1969 - Reformation Sunday
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One of the more creative television commercials is the one promoting a tablet, which when dropped into a glass of water, becomes a very potent antidote for several common, bodily afflictions. It is even effective against an exotic, recently discovered affliction called the "Blahs". Now I have no formal training in Medical Science and so I am unable to reveal the clinical description of the "Blahs". But as I understand it, it is part physiological and part psychological. Very slippery to diagnose, yet we all know when we have it: and it is highly contagious. If you have the "blahs" very long, your husband or wife inevitably will contract it from you and here I speak with some experience. In the final analysis the "blahs" resembles intense emotional fatigue which is expressed in physical tiredness, inertia. And though the magic tablet may help, the most commonly practiced home remedy is to stare at a blank wall - or a television screen, which is euphemism for an electronic blank wall, and lots of sleep.

We have the "blahs". Just as certainly as this is Sunday morning the American People are in the middle of a "blah" epidemic. You and I have it. We feel it in each other: we keep contaminating each other with it. We are as tired emotionally and physically as any people ever were: and we're doing a monumental amount of wall staring. Particularly in the Church. Now with that improbable introduction, and with the promise that we're going to look a little more deeply into the causes of our ailment, allow me to direct your attention to the fact that this is Reformation Sunday. The two are related - our having the "blahs", and this being Reformation Sunday. But it's going to take me a little time to describe how.

To understand the significance of the Protestant Reformation we have to get inside the minds of two men - St. Paul, and Martin Luther - neither one of which appears ever to have had the "blahs", by the way.

Paul was the first Christian to reflect philosophically on the meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it confronted a particular culture and a particular religion. That is, Paul, was the first Christian Theologian. But he was also a Jew, and a good one, and he embodied in himself the conflict of Gospel and Jewish culture. Paul was part of a culture obsessed with religion - and the concept he chose to symbolize this obsession was the law. For Paul "law" meant really two things.

First, the Law was the collection of Mosaic and Deuteronomic statutes which along with the collected historic interpretations, made up the Torah. The religious law dominated the life of the faithful Jew. It told him what to eat and when: it told him when to worship and how: it regulated his relationships with friends, foes and livestock in his field.

But Paul meant more than this objective reality - this behavioral code - when he used the word "law". Law, for him indicated a mentality - a way of being religious, an approach to life based on the assumption that whatever men needed from God - love, blessing, grace, righteousness, forgiveness, salvation - was available to them if they pulled the proper levers, by living the right kind of life.

It was this phenomenon that Paul meant when he talked about the Law. God and man are separated - and the way reconcilation is effected - the way the two are brought together is by man being religious, observing the customs, demonstrating piety, repeating the proper prayers. Religion - summarized and symbolized by the word "law" was man's bridge to the Almighty.

Paul saw that this law - and the religiosity in which it is expressed, quickly becomes an end, in and of itself. It's thrust is inward - it focuses on the self and the self's quest for righteousness. And because it is so totally self-centered it gives birth to a whole system of institutions and offices the sole function of which is to perpetuate the same religiosity.

It is in this kind of context then that the Gospel, as Paul understood it, ran head on into religion and culture - which for the Jew were one and the same thing. The Gospel is the very good news that men are justified by faith. Today's English Version provided the best rendering of that passage I've ever read: "God's grace is a gift, and it is free - no strings attached. It is just there, to be grasped by all who will believe: because that's the kind of God he is.

What that does is to completely reverse the direction of religion. It literally turns religion inside out. God has acted to bridge the gap. In Jesus Christ he has done all that is necessary for God and man to be reconciled. And so religion doesn't have to be concerned with earning something that has already been given. Instead it is now free to deal with the world God loves and the neighbor God loves and the kind of living he wants for all his children. So much for Paul.

The early history of a German monk by the name of Martin Luther reads as if none of this was ever said or written; almost as if Jesus Christ had never happened. 1500 years after Paul, brother Martin entered an Augustinian monastery almost fanatically obsessed with a fear of God's wrath. He quickly and totally emersed himself in the rigors of the monastic life: praying, fasting, working, getting awake in the middle of the night to flog himself with a leather strap - all for the sake of earning God's grace and escaping his wrath. And then one day Martin Luther, now a Priest and Doctor of Theology, discovered the third chapter of Romans and Paul's concepts of law, grace and justification. Man is saved by faith - not by the law; not by the Mosaic law, not by Jewish religiosity - and neither Roman Law and Roman religiosity.

When a papal representative set up shop near Wittenberg to sell Indulgences, Luther took issue. He wrote out 95 theses against the practice of selling the Grace of God, nailed them to the door of the Castle Church and the rest is history. He was excommunicated and gradually came to see that history had indeed repeated itself. The law - this time in the form of Roman Catholic piety and religiosity again stood in opposition to the Gospel. Once again an institution had emerged, dependent on this concept of men winning access to God by religious activity, and again committed solely to self perpetuation.

The Church taught that a man becomes a Christian by obeying its law, its rules, ritual and customs. Luther saw that a man is a Christian when he accepts the fact that he is a Christian by faithful worship and right living. The Church taught that a man could gain entrance to an elite Corps of Chrtistians by being a preist, or monk or nun. Luther taught that all Christians stood on equal footing before God, and that the way they expresssed their faith is by being the best shoemakers, soldiers, teachers, mothers, fathers as they could. The Gospel, in short, frees men from an obsession with self centered religiosity to become truly men.

Only the naive really believe that the issue was settled, once and for all, in the Reformation. HIstory continues to repeat istelf. Protestantism keeps coming up with new laws - new gimmicks to earn the love and forgiveness of God. "Don't drink, don't smoke, don't do this, don't do that" the old litany used to run. And today much of what goes under the name of Christianity tries to pawn itself off as a one-way ticket to heaven; or a spiritual beauty parlor in which we can continually make ourselves more fitting recepients of God's free gift of salvation. A lot of people like it that way because it conveniently expresses the self-centeredness that inhabits all of us. A lot of people prefer the dulusion of earning their way to heaven while the world all around them literally goes to hell.

But suddenly, from the Church in the best spirit of Protestantism has come the clarion call to get out into the world and live life as agents of Christ's reconciliation. From Councils of Churches, Ecclesiastical Baards and Commissions, committes and even pulpits good Christian people are suddenly being told to leave the comfort of worship, ruberic and ritual and go out into the world of starving, angry, fighting people and do something for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Question: What's that got to do with religion. Answer: Absolutely nothing. But it does have everything to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That's what the Reformation was all about. Our salvation has been secured - we don't have to worry about it, or try to earn it. It has been given to us, and our only imperative is to live it. The Church is no longer the vehicle of our salvation. Jesus Christ is that. The Church is the community in which we evaluate it, and through which we change the whole world in his name.

So far so good. But when you and I turn our attention outward, to a world quite unlike anything St. Paul or Martin Luther ever imagined, we get the "blahs". We are tired. We are emotionally exhausted. For several years we've had an ugly war hanging over our heads: we told ourselves that it will go away - but it hasn't. It continues to kill our young men and sap the strenth out of our economy - and the coalition of

hippies and intellectuals we once could call radicals for opposing the war has become a new coalition of businessmen and insurance agents and housewives, one million strong, and they are telling us that this war will never end, until we make it end.

We have to cope with the prospect of a Red China, now a nuclear power - soon able to drop those bonbs on New York and Chicago: and for twenty years our goverenment has been telling us that that too will go away if we just ignore it long enough; but it hasn't.

We have to cope with a spiralling inflation that has effected everyone here. Our campuses are noted now for their violence level. Students subsidized by our money tell us we've created machines that service the establishment, "elite concentration camps", instead of institutions of higher education. In our cities blacks and whites confront each other with violent rhetoric and violent behavior. People move out, the tax rate soars, municipal services decline. The air is full of dirt and strontium 90. The streams are polluted with industrial waste. Drugs are in - people talk about marijuana in about the same way they used to talk about women smoking. Everybody's buying a gun.

On and on it goes, and the news media pumps it to us twenty four hours a day. We are the first generation of men ever to know what was happening to them while it happens. And it all gives us a monumental case of the "blahs". Life is truly tough - and we're very tired thinking about it all.

And we go to church on Sunday morning to that traditional respite from life's concerns to be comforted and salved and spiritually massaged; to hear that everything's really O.K. if we keep obeying the right rules. And more often than not we get more of the same. We're made to feel guilty for our foriegn policy, responsible for poverty among us and told to pay reparrations to people we always thought were pretty nice as long as they stayed in their places.

And if we didn't have the "blahs" before that will do it. We feel worse at 12:00 than we did at 11:00. So we retreat - to the back yard, the T.V., patio or den - to those last havens of rest and refreshment. We have the "blahs" so badly, nothing will get us out. We want only to be left alone. It's really a widespread phenomenon. Community organizations of all types are suffering today - because people are tired - emotionally and physically. Life is getting to be a bit too much.

It's happening here at Bethany Presbyterian Church. We have the "blahs": the apathy is thick - at our meetings - our planning sessions - even our worship. We must assume, whenever we plan a program, that no matter what it is - no matter who is involved or how good its content, the vast majority of church members just aren't going to be interested. No one is quitting in opposition to policy - everyone knows they should come to church. It's simply a whole lot easier tostay at home.

The church today is under severe attach today - by those who say it is doing too much, and by those who say it isn't doing enough. Some are predicting that the church will never make it to the 21st century. I don't believe that. But should that dire prediction come true - it will not be because of attack from within or without. We will have died of the "blahs".

It's never been easy to be a Christian. St. Paul was ultimately a martyr. On this Reformation Sunday we remember the soul-rendering agony, the courage and stamina of Martin Luther. It's never been easy - but I believe it is quite possible that it has never been this hard either. The temptation to withdraw - to succumb to the "blahs" is probably greater today than ever.

Please don't. In the name of Jesus Christ let us live in this world - let us confront its problems - let us embrace our salvation and then go out and do something in His name. Amen.

In times past your Spirit has picked up tired and weary men and sent them into the world on fire. Our Father, we pray for that renewing, recreating life giving Spirit. Amen.